

# THE PERSISTENT PREDILECTION FOR PAPER

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*When it comes to book-length texts, readers around the world continue to display a preference for print over screens. This article speculates about the possible reasons why digitisation has not (yet) affected the printed book the way it has other media. Among the reasons advanced are emotional and sentimental attachment at a personal level; the long history of prestige of printed books at a social level; the fixity of print, which answers better to the embodied nature of human cognition than the ephemerality and fluidity of the immaterial digital text; and the unconscious appreciation that the investment required for the production of material goods is likely to act as a publication membrane filtering out the most worthless texts. To this may be added a certain weariness about the virtual world which seems to have set in more recently.*

**Keywords:** book materiality; digital deluge; print persistence; reading habits; textual medium



In 1994 the American novelist Annie Proulx memorably went on record writing in the New York Times: 'Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen. Ever.'<sup>1</sup> She may not have been right about the nobody ever, but her conviction was – and is – undeniably

shared by most readers. For so much is clear: if the digital deluge should indeed spell the end of the book, it is certainly taking its time succumbing. A quarter of a century after Proulx's lapidary pronouncement, and a decade after the advent of the ground-breaking Amazon Kindle in 2007,<sup>2</sup> book industry

statistics still speak for a collective fondness for paper books. E-books have their highest market share – about 20% – in the US. Elsewhere the figures range between 15% in the UK – the second highest uptake – to as little as 0% in quite a number of countries. Most European countries are sitting at the low end in between, with for example France at 3%, Germany at 4.5%, the Netherlands pushing 7% and Slovenia at less than 1%.<sup>3</sup> These figures are especially noteworthy if we compare them with what happened in the case of music and film. For where watching and listening are concerned, analogue and digital show a roughly inverse proportion.

Given the rapid digitization of music and film, but also newspapers, over the last few decades, it is astonishing that so many paper books are still being published – and bought – in paper form. Readers' attachment to paper – 'curling up with a good book' or affectionately smelling its pages – has been recurrently disparaged as a matter of mere emotion and sentiment. Emotion and sentiment or not, the American researcher Naomi Baron found that tertiary students in the three countries she researched (Germany, America and Japan) stated a clear preference for hardcopy, both for academic and pleasure reading.<sup>4</sup> The American textbook publisher Scholastic found in 2015 that 'nearly two-thirds of children (65%)—up from 2012 (60%)—agree that they'll always

want to read print books even though there are ebooks available'.<sup>5</sup>

One way in which readers' preference for hardcopy expresses itself is in the lack of seriousness with which people read texts on screen compared to texts on paper. Two vast meta-studies have recently corroborated this recurrent research finding, establishing this effect of screens on our reading habits beyond doubt. Indeed, they found that the effect is even becoming stronger over time. Rather than younger people becoming used to screens and treating them as an equivalent alternative substrate to paper, they are in fact increasingly less inclined to take screens seriously as a reading surface.<sup>6</sup> For example, one very notable way in which this lack of

seriousness about screens expresses itself is that people are less motivated to engage in metacognitive learning regulation in the case of digital texts.<sup>7</sup> That is to say that they take less care to check whether they have understood what they have just been reading before continuing.

Paper-based reading habits are thus proving remarkably persistent, also among young people. Whence this persistence? Why has digitization not taken over the book the way it has the other media? Trade figures of course say nothing about the reasons why people continue to prefer paper. Neither do the meta-studies just cited attempt to answer the question why

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people of all ages should take screen texts less seriously than they do texts on paper. Is the continuing preference for paper really just a matter of emotion and sentiment, as many commentators insist?

**C**learly emotion and sentiment do play a role in the resistance to e-reading – and indeed, why should they not? It matters for their personal and social status that books have a history. In your own life you may treasure memories of being read to when young. You may have been struck by the veneration of a favourite teacher for her books. You may remember the intense joy of discovering that you could independently read your way through volume after volume of your local library. But books have a social history, too. In that social history reading aloud goes back further than reading silently to oneself. Reverence for books is of all time, as is the habit of using them to make our store of knowledge visible and tangible, for example by collecting them in libraries or displaying them on coffee tables. For the possession of books represents symbolic capital and prestige, even if this does not go for all genres and purposes equally. The experience of such reverence may of course be merely vicarious; not everyone has a personal affinity with books. Nevertheless the amount of discussion generated by the question whether swearing oaths on

e-readers or even tablets showing a bible app is acceptable given that the ‘inherent respect given to the print version of the bible ... doesn’t attach itself to a Kindle or the iPad’ testifies to deeply and widely held convictions about the symbolic status of the printed book<sup>8</sup> – as does the continuing effectiveness of, say, book burnings.<sup>9</sup>

**‘The screen is a notorious temptation space. Online it takes an almost superhuman effort to keep reading’**

**A** personal history of emotional connections with printed books, in combination with a social history of prestige attached to them, no doubt helps to explain the special regard in which paper books are held. But there may be others at play, too. Especially the finding that texts on screen are taken less seriously than texts on paper may offer a clue. For example, it does not seem far-fetched to surmise that the ephemeral, fluid nature of the immaterial digital text is central to this effect.<sup>10</sup>

**O**ver the last couple of decades the notion has been gaining ground that human cognition is embodied. It has been suggested that one notable effect of this is that it causes a predilection for giving things real-world ‘addresses’.<sup>11</sup> Just as we ourselves bodily have to be somewhere in space, we like the things we deal with similarly to be in a known space. When it comes to text, it has been found, for instance, that dealing with hypertext or text that needs to be scrolled makes

cognitive demands over and above text that is ‘anchored’ to the page. This ‘cognitive overload’ as it is often called, may be a consequence of the embodied nature of our cognition.<sup>12</sup> In the case of music and film the materiality or otherwise of the substrate is irrelevant: we only consume them through our eyes and ears just as we watch or listen in real life. In the case of text there is always a medium involved. The embodiedness of our cognition – or so the thinking goes – would then prefer the text to be mapped to the dimensions of a material object. This would explain the – perhaps partly or largely subliminal – advantages of paper compared with screen that have been reported in research of reading fluency and comprehension.

That the famous centuries-old Art of Memory demanded its practitioners mentally to assign a physical location to all items that needed to be remembered attests to the importance of real-world spatial orientation.<sup>13</sup> If the lack of anchoring of digital text in a fixed material location should be in any way detrimental to the reading experience would this not affect reading for the purpose of learning and memorising in particular, adding to the perceived inferiority of screen texts mentioned?

Indeed, to explain the widespread preference for reading from paper materiality may also be relevant in a more indirect way. In a world governed by the concept of scarcity of resources (think of money, time, attention), the very fact that someone has thought to invest such scarce resources in something ipso facto makes that

something meaningful. That a paper book takes effort to produce, and that someone has demonstrably lavished care and money on its creation, may thus be interpreted – consciously or (equally likely) unconsciously – as evidence of value. Material products are by definition finite, and scarcity contributes to their value. By contrast, there is no economic scarcity attached to their digital counterparts. A digital file – say a text at a given Web address – may be downloaded an unlimited number of times. Its intrinsic value can only be established from actual reading of its content; scarcity and other qualities of material goods (such as ownership and collectability) are irrelevant.

Perhaps those who never gave up their paper habits have always intuited the benefits of reading from a material substrate. However that may be, among those who did largely turn to a more digital way of life a certain weariness about the virtual world has recently begun to set in. It has, for instance, been known for years now that intensive social media use can make people feel worse rather than better. As a case in point, researchers from Humboldt University in Berlin and Darmstadt Technical University found in 2013 that users frequently perceive Facebook as a stressful environment. One in three people felt worse after visiting the site and more dissatisfied with their lives. People who browsed passively without contributing were affected the most, the chief cause being envy of other people’s lives and experiences.<sup>14</sup> It took Facebook a few years to acknowledge the bald facts, which it did reluctantly in December 2017.<sup>15</sup> Similar effects have been

reported for other ways of being online, such as gaming apps and the use of smartphones in general.<sup>16</sup>

Many people report feeling empty and drained with nothing to show for time spent online. This common experience may be an additional factor playing into the revival of offline reading. Reading has been shown to be a good antidote to online stress. 'Reading carried out in "fertile solitude" fosters readers resilience and greater impermeability to social pressures and expectations, such as those encountered especially

on social media.'<sup>17</sup> It appears that it is reading, not the paper book as such, that serves as an antidote to the sense of emptiness induced by social media. Yet as we know, the screen is a notorious temptation space. Online it takes an almost superhuman effort to keep reading in the face of the incessant and insistent siren calls of distraction. The fierce debate about whether the paper book will survive the digital revolution has yet to die down. But if a good read is your preferred remedy to the sense of time waste associated with so much screen use, a paper book is definitely the better choice.



<sup>1</sup> Annie Proulx, 'Books on Top', *New York Times* (26 May 1994), <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/23/specials/proulx-top.html>.

<sup>2</sup> And several decades after the birth of the e-book, often identified as the moment Michael Hart keyed in the United States Declaration of Independence on the University of Illinois' mainframe in 1971.

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that these percentages mostly concern trade channels, excluding e-reading of self-published books, fan fiction and other such alternative sources. For more details and trends in the e-book market, see Wischenbart Content and Consulting, *Global eBook 2017: A report on market trends and developments* (Vienna: Rüdiger Wischenbart Content and Consulting, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> N. Baron, *Words onscreen: The fate of reading in a digital world* (New York: OUP, 2015), Chapter 4, 'The appeal of words onscreen', pp. 62–92.

<sup>5</sup> Scholastic, *Kids & Family Reading Report*, 5th edn, 2015, <http://www.scholastic.com/readingreport/Scholastic-KidsAndFamilyReadingReport-5thEdition.pdf?v=100>.

<sup>6</sup> L.M. Singer and P.A. Alexander, 'Reading on paper and digitally: What the past decades of empirical research reveal', *Review of Educational Research*, 87 (2017), pp. 1007–1041; P. Delgado, C. Vargas, R. Ackerman et al., 'Don't throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on comprehension', under review, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> R. Ackerman and M. Goldsmith, 'Metacognitive regulation of text learning: On screen versus on paper', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 17 (2011), pp. 18–32..

<sup>8</sup> Donald Whitney, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, quoted in: *Fox News*, 'Is A Digital Bible Less Holy? U.S. Officials Increasingly Sworn In On Tablets | Fox News', <<http://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/2014/07/14/is-digital-bible-less-holy-us-officials-increasingly-sworn-in-on-tablet.html>> (1 March 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_burning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_burning).

<sup>10</sup> Other factors may include the fact that textual communication online is increasingly a two-

way street, fostering in the reader a sense of equality with the author, effectively robbing him of his special status. Also, the need for constant evaluation of any online text's reliability on the reader's part will weaken its authority. And then there is the lack of control on the part of the individual user in the face of the power of the large platforms: texts may vanish or change, functionalities disappear and permissions be withdrawn.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Changizi 'The Problem with the Web and E-Books Is That There's No Space for Them', *Psychology Today*, 7 February 2011 <[www.psychologytoday.com/blog/nature-brain-and-culture/201102/the-problem-the-web-and-e-books-is-there-s-no-space-them](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/nature-brain-and-culture/201102/the-problem-the-web-and-e-books-is-there-s-no-space-them)>, (1 March 2018).

<sup>12</sup> D. DeStefano & J.A. LeFevre, 'Cognitive load in hypertext reading: A review', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23 (2007), pp. 1616-1641.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Frances Yates, *The art of memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> H. Krasnova, H. Wenninger, T. Widjaja, et al., 'Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users' Life Satisfaction?', [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256712913\\_Envy\\_on\\_Facebook\\_A\\_Hidden\\_Threat\\_to\\_Users%27\\_Life\\_Satisfaction](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256712913_Envy_on_Facebook_A_Hidden_Threat_to_Users%27_Life_Satisfaction). See also M.L. Nguyen Steers, R.E. Wickham & L.K. Acitelli, 'Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage Is Linked to Depressive Symptoms', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 33: 8 (2014), pp. 701-731,...

<sup>15</sup> Facebook presented the data as a reason to introduce new settings, supposedly to enhance active participation, although cynics have suggested that the new settings would force advertisers to pay more for appearing in people's timelines. At any rate, in recent months many tech world insiders have been calling to make social media less addictive, ameliorating their negative effects on people's sense of wellbeing.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, T. Panova & A. Lleras, 'Avoidance or boredom: Negative mental health outcomes associated with use of Information and Communication Technologies depend on users' motivations', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58 (2016), pp. 249-258.

<sup>17</sup> The Conversation, 'How reading fiction can help you improve yourself and your relationship to others', <<https://theconversation.com/how-reading-fiction-can-help-you-improve-yourself-and-your-relationship-to-others-88830>>, (1 March 2018).